

THE SINGIN' FAMILY

by George Swetnam

Chapter One -- "Go to Sleep Singin'"

We were a "singin' family", all right, but I never realized it for a long time. The words a mountain child knows are the ones he hears his family use, not the ones outsiders use about him and his folks.

Our family came honestly by that bent for song. At least three of my grandparents were singers, and Aunt Lou Ferguson boasted she could sing old-timey songs all night without ever repeating. Some of the ballads and dance songs had been brought to America by the first Swetnams, Staffords, Turners and other kin when they came over, mostly from England, and mostly before the Revolution.

To tell the truth, if it hadn't been for a dance there wouldn't have been any Swetnams of our kin in America. -- But that's another story, that the Methodist relatives would like to forget. I'll tell it at the fitten time.

We sang a lot at home -- just at home by ourselves -- as well as when we went to meetings, or to parties, or workings or quilting bees. Maybe that was because there wasn't much else to do a lot of the time, but work, and maybe we sang as much to keep up our spirits as for any other reason. After all, you have to do something when you're poor and proud, and we were as pore as Job's turkey when I can first remember. It wasn't the kind of poverty we have nowadays, where a man can say: "The Hell with work; I'll just live on relief." There wasn't

any relief. And when there wasn't any more to eat or spend, there wasn't any more, and that was all.

We weren't exactly down and out, but when I can first recall we were mighty hard up.

Now there are different degrees of being hard up in the mountains, or there were in those days.

We never got quite as sore as old Lafe Rubey, who was mighty surprised when his wife left him because she couldn't stand living the way they had to. They spent one winter in a ramshackle log house that the neighbors called "just a rail pen", and then the next one in a cave. Lafe was plenty puzzled and upset when Minnie left him and got a job as a hired girl, working for just her keep.

"I don't know what it takes to please that woman," he told a neighbor. "I let her live in a house that man made, an' she didn't like that, so I let her live in a house that God made. But she just couldn't be pleased."

No matter how hard things got, mountain people were nearly always hopeful. Like old Bill Simmons.

Bill's wife got powerful melancholy one day in the fall, with winter comin' on, and a big family of children all in rags, and no money. But Bill wasn't worried. He had hope to hold out, even if it was a year away, and depended on the uncertainties of a crop and the work of making linen out of flax and clothes from the linen.

"Help's at hand, ol' woman," Bill roared jovially at his wife. "Help's at hand. I've got a bushel of flax seed in the loft."

Some of our neighbors lived so close to the thin edge that it didn't take much to make them feel rich.

"I'm jutht ath rich ath I want to be," exulted lisping little

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Bug Bivins one day. "I've got a buthel of meal, a gallon of thorghum an' a peck of turnipth." He meant it, too.

Whether or not you were "trash" depended partly on family, and partly on how you took it when you got hard up, as nearly anybody was liable to. You could just let things go, like Lafe and Bill and Bug, or you could fight it, even if you lost. Our families weren't trash, and we fought it.

Dad had come of a well-to-do family, for Eastern Kentucky, and even went to college for a year. But he had been tied too close to his mother's apron strings, and she coaxed him back from college; when he tried homesteading in North Dakota she coaxed him back again after two years -- before he had proved his claim.

Willie Swetnam was a gay young buck while he was teachin' school back around home after that, and when he went to get married he didn't have over twenty dollars to his name. That wasn't bad for those days, and Mother didn't hold back on account of it.

She was Flora May Stafford, and she was sixteen, goin' on seventeen, and her father was Jesse Stafford, who was runnin' a store and a water mill, and was postmaster at Staffordsville when the Republicans were in power, and was making money fast.

Mother made Willie propose twice to prove he meant it, for she had another beau -- another young schoolteacher who was studying geology, and later made so much money in coal that if she had married him I wouldn't ever have needed to worry about money. I used to get wishful, sometimes, because his little girl had a pony to ride. But Mother would remind me that she needed a pony, because she was crippled, and that I might have been a cripple, too. That ought to be enough to tell anybody from the Big Sandy Valley

who that beau was.

Mother was Dad's pupil in a one-room school, and he proposed to her at the noon recess, and she refused him. She must have been shaky, though, for that afternoon at recess she wrote some copybook maxim on the blackboard that caused him to propose again on the way home from school. I never could get them to tell me what it was she wrote.

Dad's family lived over on Blaine Creek, thirty miles away from where mother lived on Paint. She went to Grandpa Stafford to talk it over.

"All them Blaine fellers is hard drinkers," he told her. "But if you can keep him sober he ought to be all right." So they had the preacher in, and got married right away.

What Grandpa said didn't mean he was a prohibitionist, or anything like that. He kept his jug of whiskey behind the front door, just the same as anybody else.

The bottle didn't cause Dad and Mother trouble, but two panics, sickness and death did. Dad tried farming, teaching and keeping store, but by the time I came along fourteen years later -- the last button off Gabe's coat, as the saying was -- we were still on mighty short pickin's.

I can't recall that there was ever a time without anything at all in the house to eat. Many a time, though, breakfast was just bread, butter and jelly; dinner (at noon) mostly bread and "rebel" gravy, and supper cold cornpone and milk.

For those who had the misfortune not to be brought up in the mountains, I'd better explain about rebel gravy. It was invented when the Yankees carried off just about everything at the time of the War, and was made from water, flour, salt and the

grease from a little fried salt side or fat back. It doesn't seem like much now, but back in those days it used to taste mighty good, if the meat wasn't too rancid. Sometimes Mother used to disguise the rancid taste pretty well by frying the meat with plenty of pepper, or a little sugar on it, or rolled in meal.

Well, when you're living like that, a song fills up a pretty big hole in your insides, and we sang a lot. About the only time we didn't sing was at meals or in bed, and sometimes we would sit around the table after meals and sing, in spite of an old family rule: "We don't sing at table."

Sometimes we sang in bed, but Dad and Mother didn't approve of that. They used to quote us an old proverb of warning: "Go to sleep singin' and wake up cryin'."